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ABSTRACT

Although English teachers have implicitly been aware of the functions of writing, they may not always have explored the ways writing can be used to enhance learning: learning of content, of skills, and of self. Arthur Applebee noted that English teachers were most likely to stress personal and imaginative experiences in their writing assignments, although testing of subject-area content was reported to be an important use of writing in 46% of their classrooms. The most common assignments in English classes are the expository essay, the personal narrative, and the journal. Less widely used but still popular are the study guide and the formal and informal letter. One activity for developing the ability to summarize, a necessary skill for writing an effective essay, is precis writing, which, it is emphasized, is a brief version of the original and should not be confused with a paraphrase or a summary/abstract, both of which are defined in turn. The student journal is the most popular "new" arrival on the writing-to-learn scene, perhaps because it can be a documentary of both academic and personal growth. Student journals are particularly effective in shaping daily classroom activities to permit students to achieve more active, involved roles in the learning process. One final writing activity which can involve both creative and expository writing is the formal and informal letter. Writing provides students with the opportunity for self-expression, enabling them to react on both cognitive and affective levels to the ideas, information, and emotions they encounter as they gain an understanding of themselves and their relation to the world. (Contains 66 references.) (NH)

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Writing to learn in English: A Synthesis of Research and Instructional Practices.

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Writing to learn in English: A Synthesis of Research and Instructional Practices.

"Writing...is a tool for discovering one's thoughts and feelings, as a unique mode of learning." (Oliver, 1982, p.164)

As the value of writing as a tool for learning is being recognized in subjects like science and social studies, the English teacher can justifiably claim that writing has always been an integral part of English courses. Even when the study of language or the practice of composition was divorced from the reading of literature, it was literally impossible to exclude writing from the other focusses. How can students demonstrate their knowledge of and skill in language without writing? And how can students express their response to what they read except by speech--which is temporary--or by writing? How can students do research or study or take exams without writing? As for the development of critical response and creative endeavour, writing is essential for growth. Although English teachers have implicitly been aware of the functions of writing, they may not always have employed writing to its potential. This article will explore the variety of ways writing can be used to enhance learning in English: learning of content, of skills, and of self.

Since Applebee's classic surveys (1981, 1983) of the extent and types of writing being done in secondary school classes, other surveys have carried out similar investigations (Briggs et al., 1981; Tighe and Koziol, 1982; Knoblauch and Brannon, 1983; Stewart and Leaman, 1983; Pearce, 1984; Parker, 1985). Applebee summarized the kinds of writing being done as: writing without composing (e.g. short answers); informational uses of

writing (e.g. note-taking, summarizing, reporting, analyzing); personal uses of writing (e.g. journal, letters); imaginative uses of writing (e.g. stories, poems, plays). Although 44% of class time in all subjects involved writing activities, these tended to be mechanical (short answers rather than paragraph length or longer). Applebee noted that English teachers were most likely to stress personal and imaginative experience in their writing assignments, although testing of subject-area content was reported to be an important use of writing in 46% of their classrooms. One of the English teachers from the city high school acknowledged this duality of goals:

> I think there are two reasons (for asking students to write), that are not generally connected to each other. One is, I need to know if they are learning what I am teaching for all of the reasons that you know--to grade them, to grade me, to know whether to continue a unit, to judge...all of that stuff. And the other one, and the one that I think is more important but probably really isn't, I think it's almost impossible for you to organize what you know and to really understand what you know if you haven't tried to put it down on paper. So let me say it another way; the second reason ...in order to really understand something, you have to have tried to tell it to someone else, and that's really why I have them write. (p.61-62)

Teachers gave the following reasons for asking students to write in English classes:

1) stress on information versus personal experience
   --to correlate experience with topic (47%)
   --to test learning of content (46%)
   --to express feelings (39%)
   --to share imaginative experiences (30%)
   --to remember information (19%)
   --to summarize class material (14%)

2) stress on concepts versus skills
   --to test clear expression (61%)
   --to practice writing mechanics (47%)
   --to force thinking (44%)
   --to teach proper essay form (28%)
   --to apply concepts to new situations (22%)
   --to explore out-of-class material (5%)

In Knoblauch and Brannon's (1983) review of programs offering cross-disciplinary writing, the majority of these programs were little more than "grammar across the curriculum" to encourage students to use standard or correct writing. Even the best programs emphasized "packaging information across the curriculum" with content of a course as the main concern and writing a wholly subordinate activity. Parker (1985) surveyed the high schools in a district and found that the majority of writing across subjects occurred in grades 9 and 10; there were significant differences in the amount of writing done by able and less able students; transactional writing dominated, except for the top ability students who did expressive writing in English. Pearce (1984) asked English teachers to rank order the kinds of writing activities they assigned with the following results: essay questions, answer review questions, research paper, in-class writing, and writing as homework. More specific writing assignments were ranked by Tighe and Koziol (1982): personal responses to readings; describe scenes, objects, etc.; writing directions; notetaking for personal reference; comparison/contrast of views; and narration of events.

In addition to such surveys of classroom practice, there have recently been several useful articles, either prescriptive or descriptive, which provide suggestions for improving students' writing. These are clearly a response to data on students' writing achievement. The National Assessment of Educational Progress in Writing (1986) reports that fewer than 30% of 11th graders can write adequate persuasive papers and only 18% can write adequate imaginative pieces. Goldberg (1983) explains the objectives of

the National Writing Project as essential for a successful writing program: frequent writing in varied modes, emphasizing process as well as product, sharing writing, etc. Judy (1981) adds that correctness should be placed in the context of the whole writing process, that writing should be extended throughout a school curriculum, and that standards of success should include more than standardized test results. Describing the Bay Area Writing Project, Couillard (1981) emphasizes the key role of the teacher as participant and model in the writing class. Haley (1982) agrees that the teacher is important as are peers in providing feedback. In an excellent article on traditional writing paradigms and a cognitive process model of writing, Shah (1986) advocates the use of a working draft rather than an outline, oral input from peers and the teacher, and ultimate publication of the written product. Recommending a writing procedure based on a shared experience, Britton and Hertz (1983) on the other hand include a series of questions followed by an outline prior to the rough draft. Some of French's (1986) suggestions for encouraging student writers are: stress fluency rather than correctness; have students write every day; include a wide variety of types of writing. Finally, Bull (1986) claims that writing skills can be developed through talking at various stages of the writing task. Small groups and pairs move from choosing a topic to developing a story logically to revision, varying the level of input from whole class to individual.

In a seminal fastback published by Phi Delta Kappa, Myers (1984) notes that that

> Writing to learn is not learning to write...Writing to learn is based on a growing body of research into the writing process that suggests that writing can be a powerful strategy for learning content. The student who participates in a writing to learn program is likely to learn more content, understand it better, and retain it longer. As a bonus, writing skills are also likely to improve through use. (p.7)

Quoting from Tchudi and Yates, Myers lists 58 writing activities which can be integrated into content areas. Ranging from journals to letters, from reviews to notetaking, from directions to opinions, the list is "not exhaustive" (p.12). Those activities specifically recommended for English classes are personal journals, summaries of literature, and an interview in writing with a fictional character.

The traditional view that writing occurs in English classes only and that the form of writing is mainly creative is no longer accurate. Instead, a variety of modes of writing is incorporated for different purposes in all subjects. This has resulted in part from the realization by teachers and researchers that writing and reading are naturally integrated and, therefore, experiences with one mode complement learning in the other mode (Cunningham and Cunningham, 1987). Furthermore, teachers have to some extent recognized that their responsibility for teaching content can best be served by providing students with the skills needed to learn the content, thus promoting the goal of the independent learner. As a result, the English teacher is no longer in a vacuum in terms of providing instruction in writing. However,there is no doubt that the variety of writing activities being introduced in science and social studies classes, for example, is still minimal in comparison to the writing done in English.

Specifically, what are some of the writing activities presently being done in English classes? The three most common are the expository essay, the personal narrative, and the journal; two less widely used but still popular are the study guide and the formal and informal letter. The transactional modes (essay, study guide) will be discussed first, followed by the expressive modes (personal narrative, journal, and letters). The

critical essay, research report, and term paper are by no means out-dated or inappropriate for English. Many sources describe their value. While Moran (1981) sees the function of the essay as primarily for responding to literature, others advocate a broader purpose and scope for the essay (Moffett and Wagner, 1976; Gotro, 1982; Tiedtetai, et. al., 1983; Bouley, 1986; McKay, 1986). Hook and Evans (1982) comment on the importance of essay writing to persuade and of essay writing based on research. Similarly, Gutteridge (1986) considers the essay format suitable for expressing opinions. In most cases, however, the essay writing is one of a variety of writing exercises in the English classroom.

Clearly, certain subskills are necessary to write an effective essay: abstracting, paraphrasing, outlining, note-taking, for example. One activity for developing the ability to summarize is precis writing. "In precis writing the student develops a paraphrased summary or abstract of a written composition, retaining the information and flavor of the original, but usually condensing to about one third its length." (Bromley, 1985, p.407). This statement reflects the unfortunate tendency to gloss over the distinction between a precis, a summary/abstract, and a paraphrase. As noted, a precis is a brief version of the original. A summary or abstract is longer than a precis but obviously shorter than the original. Again the style and content of the original and retrained. The paraphrase, however, is an exercise of translating the original into the writer's own words; it may be as long as, or even longer than, the original. The value of this kind of exercise is described by Boulanger (1983): "Paraphrasing requires the interrelationship of comprehension and expression skills, experience and memory, problem-solving and creativity." (p.15) Each of these exercises is useful for researching and writing an essay.

Another standard teaching tool, the study guide, also continues to be effectively used, assisting students' comprehension of short stories and novels (Hook and Evans, 1982; Gutteridge, 1986). Langer (1986) sees the study guide as one element of effective study skills (the others are note-taking and essay writing). Tierney et al. (1985) also relate study guide questions to note-taking and students' written discourse. Bouley (1986) encourages teachers to develop study guides and essay questions which require higher levels of thinking. Certain variations of the study guide have appeared such as pattern guides (Olson and Longnion, 1982), the framed paragraph (Santa et al., 1985), the directed writing activity (Robinson, 1983), and PORPE - Predict, Organize, Rehearse, Practice, Evaluate (Simpson, 1986).

The personal narrative (or expressive or creative writing) assignment continues to play an important role in writing to learn in English. Petrosky (1982) and Blatt and Rosen (1984) consider a personal narrative to be a suitable method for students to respond to literature. Moran (1981) takes the opposite approach, having students write before they read in anticipation of what the literature will reveal. Other descriptors of the personal narrative are: creative writing (Blake, 1976; Butler, 1981-1982); stories and poems (Tiedt et al., 1983; Gutteridge, 1986); description and narration (Moffett and Wagner, 1976; Hook and Evans, 1982); and personal expression (Grotro, 1982; Tchudi, 1986). In a survey of high school students in 1985, Roscoe et. al. found that a surprising 86% reported that they wrote for self-expression (poetry, diary, short story, songs) outside the classroom. Dodd (1978) presents many, varied creative writing assignments to encourage such self-expression.

The most popular 'new' arrival on the writing-to-learn scene is the journal. Its widespread use has been explained by Fulwiler (1980): "A student's journal can be a documentary of both academic and personal growth, a record of evolving insight as well as the tool used to gain that insight." (p.18). He describes the scope of the journal as "somewhere on a continuum between diaries and class notebooks: whereas diaries are records of personal thought and experience, class notebooks are records of other people's facts and ideas." (p.17). Bowman (1983) sees the purposes of journals as to mirror the mind, to see and confront the self, as well as to surface academic considerations related to the coursework. "Student journals are particularly effective in shaping daily classroom activities to permit students to achieve more active, involved roles in the learning process." (Bowman, p.26) References to the value of journal writing in English abound (Moffett and Wagner, 1976; Hook and Evans, 1982; Tschumy, 1982; Gutteridge, 1986; Tchudi, 1986). The majority of advocates of the journal see its role as a secure environs in which students can respond to literature (Phelan, 1978; Blatt and Rosen, 1984; Hipple, 1984; Crowhurst, and Kooy 1985; Dias, 1985; Browning, 1986; Kirby et. al., 1986; McKay, 1986; Rupert and Brueggeman, 1986). However, there exists a range of other possible uses of the journal: a dialogue journal to encourage written interaction betweeen student and teacher (Gambrell, 1985); a tool for self-evaluation (Butler, 1982) or of evaluation of learning (Bentley, 1982); a means of values clarification (Simpson, 1986); a technique for promoting writing fluency (Arthur, 1981) or an element in the writing process (Shah, 1986); a response to any new experience (Singer and Donlan, 1980; Stock, 1986) or a diagnostic tool of students' beliefs, skills and background (Frager and Malena, 1986).

Alejandro (1981) recommends the following topics for journal writing: The way I would change this school - if anybody would listen to me; Some good things about having a job; What I'm doing to attain my goals; If I could trade places with anyone ... ; If I had three wishes ... ; What really gets to me; I am thankful for ...; I'd love to travel to ... ; The ways I'm different from everybody else; Let me tell you how to ... ; I dread being middle-aged because ... ; A place where I feel good; I really like the music of ... ; A ghost story I've heard; Adults place too much importance on ... ;I have really been influenced by ... ; Once I made a bet on ... ; They say when I was little, I used to ... ;I really felt proud when ... .

One final writing activity which can involve both creative and expository writing is the formal or informal letter. Butler (1982) suggests writing to Fictional characters whereas Rhea (1986) recommends writing for real life purposes to actual people. Tiedt et. al. (1983) suggest the following purposes for letter writing: Write to a sports hero; Write to a television star or singer; Send a holiday greeting to a hospital patient; Send a holiday note to senior citizens in a residential home; Write for free information; Write to political figures; Send a letter to parents describing one new item learned that day. Moffett and Wagner (1976) recommend the writing of fictional letters e.g. "Dear Abby" and advice reply; between two fictitious characters. Others see letter writing within the broad framework of writing activities to be done in English (Moffett and Wagner, 1976; Hook and Evans, 1982; Tiedt et al, 1983; Myers, 1984; Gutteridge, 1986).

Advocates of writing to learn are abundant (Oliver, 1982; Petrosky, 1982; Slater, 1982; Knoblauch and Brannon, 1983; Pearce, 1984; Collins, 1985; Vacca and Vacca, 1986; to name a few). However, the most comprehensive resource is Haley-James (1982). Her seminal article deals with:

1. why writing encourages learning (focusses thought, making thought available for inspection; allows more complex thought; translates mental images; is multisensory; motivates communication);
2. when writing is most likely to encourage learning (when students decide what to write about; when they talk as part of writing; when they view writing as a process; when they have their own reasons for writing; when they write frequently); and
3. how teachers can link writing to subject matter (writing to gain access to what is known; writing to preserve and express ideas and experiences; writing to inform and persuade others; writing to transact business; writing to entertain).

Thus writing can serve many purposes. As a response to reading, writing can improve comprehension, thereby assisting students to effectively interact with literature. Writing can also involve translation and application of what is heard or read, helping students to study, to do research, and to write tests. Perhaps most importantly, however, writing provides students the opportunity for self-expression, enabling them to react on both cognitive and affective levels to the ideas, information, and emotions they encounter. The value of writing to learn in English extends beyond gaining knowledge and skills of the subject to acquiring understanding of oneself and one's relation to the world, clearly a desired outcome of English.

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